Higher Education And its Perspectives with Special Reference to “Differently able” Learners

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Abstract

India has the third largest higher education system in the world—after China and the U.S.A. There has been an impressive growth in the last five decades—Universities (from 25 to 544), Colleges (from 700 to 31,324) and students (from 1 lakh to 146.25 lakh) but according to the National Sample Survey 2004, 55% of persons with special needs were illiterate and only 9% had completed higher secondary education. Further, only 7 per in the rural areas and 18 percents in the urban areas have obtained education of secondary level or above. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), 6% of India’s youth population is in Universities and Colleges. Proportionately, based on the most conservative estimate for the disabled youth population in the country (National Sample Survey, 2003), at least 3160,000 disabled youth should be in the Universities and Colleges of India. However, just 1.2% of the 3.6 lakh disabled youth, who should have been studying according to India’s norm for the general youth population, are in the Universities and Colleges. It brings the stark reality into an established truth that India’s higher educational system is not accessible to 98.8% of its disabled youth. Therefore there is an urgent need to look forward towards this situation. The present paper will discuss several such issues which are related to inclusion of “Differently Able” learners at higher level.

Keywords: perspectives, differently able.

“First they laugh at you
Then they ignore you
Then they fight with you
Then you win”

The above quotation from the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi is quite relevant in the context of persons with disabilities. In our society, there are so many examples of such eminent persons who have achieved those milestones in their life which a normal person can only dreams. India, which is the seventh largest country in the world with a population of
over one billion people spread over 3.28 million sq. Kms. in a federal structure of 29 states and 6 union territories with 32 languages and numerous dialects, the population of persons with disabilities is pegged around 2.1 percent of the total population by the census 2001. The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) which collects data on the incidence and prevalence of disability at every 10 years in 2002 quoted that percentage of persons with disabilities as 1.8 percent which includes Visual, Speech and hearing, Locomotor, Mental Retardation and Mental Illness. 

Age-wise distribution of persons with disability as per the NSSO report (2006) shows that while 26 percent of the disabled are in the age group of 60+, an equal percentage (26) are in the age group of 5 to 18 years and 46 percent are in the productive age group of 20 to 59 years. According to the National Sample Survey 2004, 55% of persons with special needs were illiterate and only 9% had completed higher secondary education. Further, only 7 per in the rural areas and 18 per cents in the urban areas have obtained education of secondary level or above.

School attendance amongst children with various types of disabilities ranges from a high of 56.4 percent (Locomotor) to low of 13 percent (Mental retardation). Enrolment of children with other disabilities varies with the type of disabilities- 50 percent (Hearing impairment), 49 percent (Low vision), 36.5 percent (Speech disability), 22.6 percent (Blindness) and 13 percent (Mental illness). Further dropout rate amongst children with disability is higher than that of non-disabled children. Approximately 11 percent of children with disability in urban areas are enrolled in special schools as compared to only 1 percent in rural areas. The situation of women with disability is even grimmer. They have lesser access to educational opportunities. The enrolment of girls at both primary and secondary level is much less than the boys with disability- only 40 percent girls with disabilities are enrolled in schools against the enrolment of 50 percent boys with disabilities.

**Philosophy behind inclusion**

- Central universities, state universities and colleges are meant for any person having the potentialities. Mere admission criteria like percentage of marks and passing qualification comes in the way of many “talented differently able”. Persons with disabilities without formal qualification can be equally productive.
- Higher education has a role to nurture talents and not necessarily on the basis of certain laid down criteria for admission.
- Nation can develop by their contribution.
- Accepting and respecting that all learners are different in some way and have different but equally valued learning needs.
- Acknowledging and respecting difference among learners, whether due to age, gender, ethnicity, language, class etc.
- Empowering learners to participate critically in the process of learning by developing their individual strengths.

**Current scenario of status of inclusive education of disabled students at higher level**
From the above going discussion, it is an obvious outcome of the fact that generally in India special education stops with primary or at the most secondary level. The Hindu 16th Aug 2004 reported that only 1.2% of the 3.6 lakhs disabled youth in country had access to higher education. Only 0.1% disabled students are enrolled in mainstream educational institution at university level and 0.51% at the school level. A research survey which was retrieved from the website, www.Aifo.it/English/.../cbr/incedu,2007 reveals that the total number of disabled students studying in Indian universities were only 1,635 (M - 76.3%; F - 23.7%). Even though the data was available from only 119 out of the total of 322 Universities in the country, it is likely to be highly representative of the overall situation in the country. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), 6% of India's youth population is in Universities and Colleges. Proportionately, based on the most conservative estimate for the disabled youth population in the country (National Sample Survey, 2003), at least 3160,000 disabled youth should be in the Universities and Colleges of India. However, just 1.2% of the 3.6 lakh disabled youth, who should have been studying according to India's norm for the general youth population, are in the Universities and Colleges. It brings the stark reality into an established truth that India's higher educational system is not accessible to 98.8% of its disabled youth. Only Banaras Hindu University (U.P.) and Aligarh Muslim University (U.P.) had the number of disabled students in three digits - 208 and 202 respectively.

Record less of the fact that the numbers were anyway very small. 38 Universities had no disabled students. These included Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (Mumbai), University of Allahabad, Guru Nanak Dev University (Amritsar), University of Rajasthan, Rabindra Bharati University (Kolkata), and Manipal Academy of Higher Education (Karnataka) among others. 31 Universities projected less than 5 disabled students, which included National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (Bangalore), School of Planning and Architecture (Delhi), Indian Institute of Technology (Kanpur), Punjab Agricultural University (Ludhiana), North Eastern Hill University (Shillong), and University of Pune. 23 Universities had more than five but less than 20 disabled students. These included Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (7), Punjab University, Chandigarh (15), Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai (16), Roorkee (9), Mumbai (15), and G.B. Pant University of Agriculture & Technology, Uttaranchal (7).

The total percentage of disabled students vis-a-vis total number of students in the Universities could be worked out only for 52 of 119 Universities. It shows that only 0.1% (male 0.07%, female 0.03 %) of the total number of students in 52 Universities were students with disabilities. This reveals the dismal state of adherence to the 3% reservation for disabled students as mandated by the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. Disability-wise data analysis of disabled students shows that among the disabled students admitted in the various Universities, the largest percentage was of students with orthopaedic disabilities (73.6%) followed by students with visual disability (19%). The percentage of students with hearing disabilities was very low (2.3%). Assuming that people with mental retardation are unlikely to reach the higher education level, 1.3 % of students with mental disabilities in the Universities were likely to be students with mental illness.

Most of the Universities had admitted students with orthopaedic and visual disabilities only. Only 11 Universities had students with hearing disabilities as well. Most of these had just one such student except Osmania University (Hyderabad) that had 23 of total of 38 students with
hearing disabilities. Students with mental disabilities were present in just two Universities: Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapith (Andhra Pradesh) and Osmania University (Hyderabad). South Gujarat University (Surat) had put all its disabled students (50) under 'Any Other' category. It seemingly did not have necessary records regarding the disability-wise break-up of its disabled students. Osmania University was the only one that projected a healthier trend in giving opportunities to students with different disabilities - out of its total 60 students with disabilities, 13 had orthopaedic disabilities, 3 visual disabilities, 23 had hearing disabilities, and 21 had mental disabilities.

95 (80%) of 119 Universities responded that they were following the 3% reservation policy for disabled students, although 18 of them did not have a single student with disability. The real situation is further made clear by the fact that average percentage of disabled students in the 52 Universities was only 0.1 %. Only 50% of the 119 Universities reported being aware of the UGC Schemes like TESPE and HEPSN. Similarly Just 11 (9%) Universities had received UGC Grant under the different schemes.

52 (44%) Universities accepted not providing any special equipment to the disabled students. 38 (32%) felt it was not applicable to them. Of the 24 (20%) who were providing the special equipment. Out of 119 Universities only 47 (39%) were giving scholarships and 29 (24%) were providing financial assistance. Considering the fact that there is a strong correlation between poverty and disability, this puts especially the disabled students at a disadvantage.

73 (61%) Universities claimed that they provided hostel facility, though only 4 listed having accessible hostel rooms and/or toilets. These were Indian Institute of Technology (Chennai and Mumbai), School of Planning and Architecture (New Delhi) and Punjab University. Some Universities responded in affirmation to the provision of special services namely scholarships, financial assistance, bus travel concession, hostel accommodation and leniency in admission policy. But some Universities reported providing writers for students with blindness and sign language interpreter for hearing impaired students. These include University of Kashmir, Shanmugha Arts, Science, Technology & Research Academy (Tamil Nadu), Manipal Academy of Higher Education (Karnataka), and Amravati University (Maharashtra).

**Challenges**

- **The challenge of poverty associated with disability:** India is the world’s second most populated country. Despite impressive gains in the last few decades, India still has more than 260 million people living in poverty. A large number of children with disabilities live in families with income significant below the poverty level. The combination of poverty and disability results in a condition of ‘simultaneous deprivation’. This is a syndrome that sets up barriers to the participation of persons with disability in the normal routines and activities of the community, including regular schooling to higher education.

- **The challenge of providing adequate levels of training to key stakeholders:** The majority of professional working in higher educational institutions in India is not trained to design and implement educational programs for students with disability in regular universities and colleges. Most teacher training programs in India do not have a unit on disability studies. The universities, which do cover some aspects of special
education in their teacher training programs, fails to train teachers adequately to work in integrated settings.

➢ **The challenge of Barrier Free Environment:** Even today, majority of universities, colleges and other higher educational institutes, are poorly designed and very few are equipped to meet the unique needs of students with disability. The lack of disability friendly transportation services and accessible buildings are considered by some to be far greater problem. Both the central and state governments will have to provide increased resources to this aspect of education to ensure successful inclusion of these students.

➢ **The challenge of filling the wide gapping between different ministries:** Different ministries in India administer various services for persons with disability. For example, while “integrated education” is the responsibility of Ministry of Human Resource Development, education in special schools is the responsibility of Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. This is just one example of the waste of already limited resources. India cannot afford to have such administrative arrangements. There is a need for streamlining administrative arrangements so that funds provided to different ministries for persons with disability can be used effectively.

*Suggestions*

I. There is a need of recognizing the talents/potentials of these people in the work environment (agriculture, music, language, medicine, culture, science & technology etc) in the slums, villages and remote places that are away from modern civilization. By simply including them in formal higher education system even our faculty members from the universities & college of higher education system.

II. These people may not be interested in earning a university degree, attending regular classes, paying heavy tuition fees etc. What are needed for these people may be facilities of university laboratories, libraries, help of expert faculties, awareness of certain programs and works that are carried out by universities and an access to the system.

III. It may be essential that the state department of higher education and MHRD along with apex bodies like UGC, ICSSR, ICAR, RCI, NCERT etc may have to work out the modus operandi to cater to these people. Infect it will be a great challenge before the nation to accommodate these people in the formal education system.

IV. Initiative from the government at both the centre and state should be taken to take initiative to create provision, financial, legislative and administrative for the education of these people.

V. All the agencies involved in various aspect of imparting education, like curriculum development, teachers’ training, funding etc, need to include disability in all their future agenda.

VI. The UGC needs to review the implementation of its schemes and take further proactive steps to enhance the access of higher education for differently able students.

VII. Most higher education institutes in India are concerned that inclusion of students with disabilities would result in lowering their standards because these students won’t be able to pass exam. This seems to be a genuine concern of teachers because it can
influence their promotion. Thus, it is necessary to establish an alternative system of examination for students with disabilities. Students in this system are asked to do activities that demonstrate their abilities rather than disabilities.

REFERENCES